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Elections supervisor addresses voting concerns in Bartow

Over the last 11 years, Bartow County Elections Supervisor Joseph Kirk said he's aware of about 10 incidents of residents casting multiple ballots in one election. "There is no negating a vote," he said. "Once a vote is cast, I can't get it back and I can't link it to the person, either."

JAMES SWIFT/THE DAILY TRIBUNE NEWS

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Bartow County Elections Supervisor Joseph Kirk admits the county's voting technology leaves much to be desired — but as outdated as the hardware may be, he nonetheless says residents shouldn't be worried about their ballots not being tallied.

"I'll be the first to say it, we need to update our voting system," he said. "That being said, it is accurate, it counts votes properly, it is a system that does one thing and it does it well — it counts votes."

Although he's heard complaints about the county's touch screen devices, he refutes accusations that the machines are "flipping votes."

"It implies something that happened that didn't," Kirk said. "What's actually happening is you touched 'candidate A' but the machine recorded it as a touch for 'candidate B,' but nothing ever changed. Once you deselect and select 'candidate A' again and you see the mark next to 'candidate A's' name, that's being recorded that way."

The problem some voters are experiencing, Kirk said, is merely the result of a calibration error.

"All we have to do is go back and recalibrate them," he said. "It's a very simple process, it takes about a minute to do ... if people have an issue with the voting machines, please tell a poll worker while you're here. That way, we can take the action right then."

Another hot topic heading into the midterm elections is Georgia's "exact match" law, a 2017 act that renders voter registration incomplete if information on applications does not match data from the state's Department of Driver Services or the Social Security Administration.

United States District Judge Leigh Martin May filed an injunction Thursday that would bar election officials in Georgia from rejecting any absentee ballots for signature mismatches — instead, those ballots would be considered provisional ballots.

"I've been waiting on the state, who has been talking to the attorneys at the Secretary of State's Office, to tell me how they envision that process," Kirk said. "And then we'll figure out how we need to implement it here for Bartow County."

Kirk explained how provisional ballots are cast.

"Those are done on paper and they can be done for a number of different reasons, be it for not having a photo ID with you up to you think you're registered to vote and we can't find you on the list," he said. "It's a similar process to voting through the mail. Once you've done the paperwork, you get issued a ballot and there's a blue booth at the poll where you go vote that ballot."

Individuals who cast provisional ballots receive two envelopes — a white one to ensure the anonymity of their vote and a salmon-colored envelope, with their names and additional information on it, so pollers can link the ballot back to them once they determine whether their ballot will be officially counted.



"After the election, we have to alert the voter whether the ballot counted and if it didn't count, the reason why," Kirk said. "If it's not counted because they were not registered to vote, part of that process is in fact registering them to vote and making sure they are eligible during the next election."

But in the past, Kirk said that has led to a few problems. He cited one such incident that happened earlier this year.

"One of those ballots was sealed up incorrectly — rather than the salmon-colored envelope being on the outside, with all the information, the white envelope was on the outside with all the information," he said. "The lucky thing is, there was only one provisional ballot cast at that polling place, so there's no question whose ballot that was. But if there had been more than one, that would have been a problem."

The county, he said, has changed its protocols to prevent such errors.

"In the past when that happened — this was probably a decade ago — we ended up having to count additional ballots on the advice of our attorney," he said. "But we do give our managers extensive training on how to handle those ballots, how to process them and because of some of these kinds of mistakes, we've changed the procedure now where the manager is not supposed to give them that salmon-colored envelope until they've already voted it [and] sealed it up properly ... if we can walk the voters through that, there's less of a chance for it to go poorly."

Of the 53,000 or so statewide voter registration applications on hold due to Georgia's "exact match" verification system, Kirk said about 60 are in Bartow County.

"The ones who are flagged because their information did not match one of those other databases, all they have to do to clear that up is when they come in to vote, have a photo ID," he said. "The pollers are not even going to talk to them about it. By the time they get to that point in the process where they see there's that flag, we've already verified their ID, we've already verified they're a person [and] they'll be allowed to vote, no problem."

While the Bartow County Board of Elections and Voter Registration strives to prevent unauthorized voting, Kirk said "double votes" have been cast in local elections — he counts up about 10 such incidents transpiring since 2007.

"Poll workers are human, we all make mistakes. Sometimes you just can't correct that mistake after the fact and all you can do is move forward and try to make sure it doesn't happen again," he said. "I do not think anyone ineligible has been allowed to vote. It's just someone who is eligible to vote mistakenly voting again."

Rather than voters intentionally casting ballots for the same candidates multiple times, Kirk said the problem is voters casting blank ballots by accident and then getting an opportunity to fill out another form.

"A blank ballot is a valid vote," Kirk said. "In higher elections, every once and a while that procedure doesn't go right, and someone is allowed to vote again that shouldn't be allowed. We catch that later, we turn that information over to the state and tell them everything that happened and let them take whatever action they feel is necessary ... they didn't take any action in 2016."

Sometimes, Kirk said, it's simply a matter of voter access cards not functioning.

"They just don't get programmed properly," he said. "The person usually takes it out of the machine a little too quickly and all the information doesn't get put on there."

When unauthorized ballots are cast, however, Kirk said pollers usually don't find out until after the election. And even then, there's virtually nothing they can do to "correct" the issue.

"There is no negating a vote," he said. "Once a vote is cast, I can't get it back and I can't link it to the person, either."